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# FOOD SYSTEMS AT RISK

## NEW TRENDS AND CHALLENGES





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## CHAPTER 4.4

EXCLUSION OF WOMEN  
AND VULNERABLE MINORITIESNinon Sirdey<sup>1</sup> and Sandrine Dury<sup>1</sup>

## SUMMARY

Women and various groups of vulnerable minorities (i.e. indigenous peoples) are major stakeholders in food systems. They are under-represented in decision-making bodies and are not properly considered in various policies and interventions. Exclusion of these people in the design and implementation of public/private policies, development and economic programmes is a source of under-performance and conflicts in food systems and societies.

### Women, key but underrated contributors to food systems, face inequalities in access to resources, services and remunerative opportunities

Women play a key economic role in urban and rural food systems. They cook for their families but also work in the food sector, as traders or processors. Due to their involvement in agriculture, they also play a role in natural resource management. According to FAO (2011), women comprise 43 percent of the agricultural labour force in developing countries and, in West Africa, they represent more than 70 percent of employees in the food processing and marketing sectors (*cf.* Figure 20).

Yet women have less access than men to productive resources and opportunities. The gender gap exists for many assets (especially land legal rights and ownership of livestock), agricultural inputs (for instance, inorganic inputs and animal traction) but also for advisory, extension and financial services. Inequalities in access to resources and services, as well as in their ability to seize emerging employment and entrepreneurial opportunities, cause differences in access to remunerative opportunities between men and women farmers (FAO, 2011). Furthermore, development programmes have difficulty in reducing the gender gap. From a review of the impacts of eight agricultural development projects on individual and household assets in seven countries in Africa and South Asia, Johnson *et al.* (2016) have shown that all projects were associated with increases in assets and other benefits at the household level, but only one contributed to reducing the gender asset gap.

Women are also increasingly hired on industrial farms or in processing companies for high-value commodities. When women have paid work (which is already limited), they face less favourable employment conditions, such as lower wages and a higher prevalence of casual and seasonal work (FAO, 2011).

Women are also self-employed in many chain activities in food systems, from transport to processing and catering. Women tend to dominate local markets, retail and cross-border informal trade (FAO and African Union, 2018). In Low-Income (LI) and Lower Middle Income (LMI) countries, urbanisation has been accompanied by a rise in informal street food vending and catering. This provides a key source of employment and earnings for women as well as supplying the urban poor with inexpensive food. However, they endure unstable business locations and inadequate infrastructure and productive assets. Their operations are labour-intensive and characterised by low profit margins.

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Despite their huge contribution, women are under-represented in the governance of food systems and in the shaping of policies. Prevailing socio-cultural norms limit their ability to exercise power and autonomous decision-making within their households as well as in rural organisations and institutions, which therefore fail to represent their needs and interests as farmers and entrepreneurs. For instance, in 18 Latin American democracies, a study found only two women among 76 ministers of agriculture and forestry at the beginning of the 2000s (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson, 2005). A study of around 125 agricultural research and higher education agencies in 15 sub-Saharan African countries found that, on average, 24 percent of the total professional posts and 14 percent of management positions were occupied by women, with consistent differences across countries (FAO, 2011). Consequently, food system policies and interventions too often rely on gender-blind approaches. More than half of the national agricultural investment plans of 38 African countries do not include any gender dimensions (FAO and African Union, 2018).

In a context where food systems are under several serious, urgent and combined threats, this gender imbalance is a missed opportunity to make women-specific issues heard and make progress in domains such as nutrition and health (Duflo, 2012), natural resource management and conflicts. Studies have shown that gender inequalities tend to lead to inefficient food systems while improvements in gender equality and economic growth may strengthen each other (World Bank, IFAD and FAO, 2009). In fact, gender-blind policies and programmes often fail to offer the enabling conditions for maximising the role of women in meeting the growing demand for agricultural products and the sustainable use of natural resources, and fail to promote healthy diets and decent employment.

First, this exclusion prevents the implementation of effective research and development programmes. Improved varieties of sorghum (caudatum type), designed by research institutes between 1970 and 1990, showed improved yields but poor technological and culinary characteristics (Trouche *et al.*, 1999) that led to West African farmers refusing to use them. The fact that women, as researchers, farmers, cooks and final users have been absent from the breeding process is one reason for the failure of these programmes.

Second, agricultural interventions or modern value chains may increase women's unpaid workload, which is a risk for their own health and nutrition and for those of their children. In West African cotton producing areas, the so-called Sikasso paradox provides a tangible example of the simultaneous improvement of cotton-maize production together with a high level of stunting in children because of

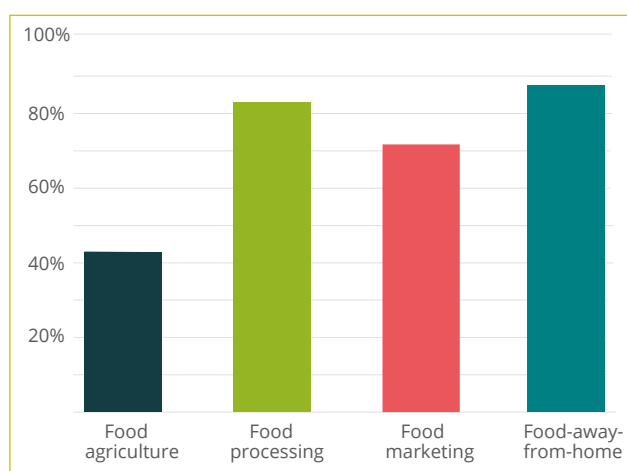
women's excessive workloads (Dury and Bocoum, 2012). The same has been observed in contract farming. Where men control the contracts, women are often not well compensated in terms of control over additional income, yet their workload increases as family labourers (FAO, 2011). Coupling agricultural interventions with interventions to reduce the gender gap in agricultural activities is likely to make the former more effective in improving nutrition security, as has been highlighted in Nepal by Malapit *et al.* (2015) (*cf.* Box 12).

Third, even when they are visible in food and nutrition policies, women are very often considered as juveniles, incompetents or simply as bodies. Kimura (2013) developed this argument in her thesis concerning the fight against malnutrition in Indonesia. She showed that most policy makers, together with scientists, considered women as culprits, i.e. the source of their own and children's nutritional problems. They displayed bad habits, inadequate cooking abilities, food practices and breastfeeding patterns that needed to be changed through education. Overlooking women like this presents a clear risk of disempowering them and, in the long run, of creating more under-development, frustration and exclusion.

Fourth, the frequent exclusionary practices affecting street food vendors may endanger food and nutrition security and social equity in the urban food economy (Loc and Moustier, 2016). This might increase inequalities since these vendors are often themselves part of the poorest segment of the population and will lose a livelihood opportunity.

### **Exclusion of vulnerable minorities and its consequences: the example of indigenous peoples**

The same exclusion from shaping public policies and development programmes holds true for vulnerable minorities, such as indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples represent 5 percent of the global population but 15 percent of the poor (FAO, 2013). They share a strong connection to their environment, unique cultures and have developed exceptional adaptive knowledge to deal with natural resources (Reyes Garcia *et al.*, 2016; Eloy *et al.*, 2018). However, global agri-food markets and industrial projects induce many threats (FAO, 2013): (i) indigenous peoples are affected by displacement that divests them of traditional practices and livelihoods; (ii) indigenous peoples are suffering from reduced environmental quality and will be among the first affected by climate change; (iii) the diversity of food utilisation and food's cultural dimension are insufficiently recognised and the global food system contributes to the shift towards the consumption of more energy-dense



**Figure 20:** Share of women's employment by food segment in West Africa.  
Source: Allen, Heinrigs and Heo, 2018.

and industrially processed foods; (iv) traditional food systems and a way of life based on shifting cultivation, pastoralism or hunting is disregarded. Most rural policies and agricultural programmes still seek to replace shifting cultivation or hunting, even though this type of agriculture is both climate-resilient and essential for the way of life of indigenous peoples.

Overlooking the considerations of indigenous cultures and livelihoods causes major disruption to traditional food systems, contributes to increased malnutrition and health problems in indigenous communities and homogenises foods and food practices around the world and risks exacerbating existing social vulnerabilities among indigenous peoples (Levang, Dounias and Sitorus, 2005). The overlapping axes of social differences (gender, rural status, class etc.) exacerbate the vulnerability of indigenous peoples.

Finally, for both women and vulnerable minorities, relative deprivation has been observed in multiple spheres, although these populations play a crucial role in food systems. Not giving them a voice and equal access to resources risks marginalising them still further and reducing their contribution to global food and nutrition security, mitigation of climate change, sustainable management of natural resources and prevention of conflicts. ●

## BOX 12

### WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT MITIGATES THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF LOW PRODUCTION DIVERSITY ON CHILD NUTRITION IN NEPAL<sup>1</sup>

The crucial role of women's empowerment in the achievement of food and nutrition security in LI and LMI countries is illustrated in a study conducted in Nepal. In Nepal, 25 percent of the population lives below the poverty line and 41 percent of children are stunted. Based on household survey data from 3,332 rural households, authors studied women's empowerment with a measure of the roles and extent of women's engagement in the agricultural sector in terms of decisions over agricultural production, access to and decision-making power over use of income and productive resources, leadership in the community and women's time use.

They first demonstrated that production diversity at the household level is positively associated with maternal and

under-five-year-old child dietary diversity and higher nutritional scores for children. Second, in areas and households with lower production diversity, women's empowerment (in particular lighter workloads and greater control over income) is found to mitigate the negative impact of less diverse production diversity on child diets and nutritional scores. Greater empowerment is also associated with greater maternal dietary diversity.

This finding suggests that women's empowerment is a key avenue for improving maternal and child diets and nutritional status, especially where the diversification of production may be limited by biophysical or agroecological conditions.

1. Based on Malapit et al., 2015.

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